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Brütsch, Matthias

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MATTHIAS BRÜTSCH  
(Zürich)

## Irony, Retroactivity, and Ambiguity: Three Kinds of “Unreliable Narration” in Literature and Film

It has become commonplace to label the narratological concept of unreliable narration a “mixed bag” or an “umbrella term”, containing or denoting a variety of different types which should be set apart. While I agree with this statement from a transdisciplinary perspective, I would argue that within literary and film theory one can identify a particular narrative form predominantly invoked when unreliability is the topic in each of these fields. Interestingly, the two narrative constellations usually referred to—one with ironic distance and the other with retroactivity as its central feature—appear considerably different and in some respects even contrary to each other. As I have argued for this claim in more detail elsewhere (Brütsch 2011b, 2014), I will content myself here with an introductory note presenting the major results of this transdisciplinary comparison.

In addition, I will discuss a third narrative form, marked by ambiguity, sometimes referred to as unreliable narration in both literary and film studies. Here I will examine the conditions under which it makes sense to call narrators generating Todorov’s (1975 [1970]: 24–40) “fantastic hesitation” unreliable and the relations and differences between the “destabilization” and the “unreliability” of narrators and their accounts. While maintaining my claim throughout that none of the three constellations are media-specific or bound exclusively to either homo- or heterodiegetic forms of narration, I will nevertheless point to differences in the way literary and filmic works establish ironic distance and ambiguity or destabilize their own narrative authority.

### 1. The Standard Examples in Literary and Film Studies

In literary studies, unreliable narration is generally associated with a homodiegetic narration shaped in such a way as to allow readers to adopt an understanding of diegetic reality which differs from the narrator’s account. The discrepancy between these two assessments establishes a distance that accords a privileged position to the reader from which he or

she can obtain an understanding unavailable to the narrator. The "uninformed" version of the narrator is the only one explicitly conveyed. An implicit meaning at odds with the narrator's account must be actively constructed by the reader, drawing on knowledge of the world in general and of fictional narratives in particular.<sup>1</sup> The narrator is usually not aware that his account or judgments would seem problematic to the addressee. For this reason, he cannot be considered guilty of deliberate deception.<sup>2</sup> Conflicts between the narrator's statements and the reader's understanding usually arise early on, and the discrepancy between the two often persists until the end. This narrative constellation can be considered ironic. The narrator's statements themselves, however, are not ironic. He really means what he says. But the narrative text as a whole is shaped in such a way so as to suggest an alternative or even opposite interpretation.<sup>3</sup> Examples of this "prototype" are Mark Twain's novel *Huckleberry Finn* (1884), in which the narrator blames himself for helping an African-American slave to escape from his master—a judgment which can be expected to be inverted by readers condemning slavery—and Ian McEwan's short story "Dead as They Come" (1978), in which the narrator tells the story of his passionate love to a woman who we soon find out is not a living human being but a mannequin in a shop window.<sup>4</sup>

When film scholars use the term unreliable narration, they often refer to the following constellation:<sup>5</sup> filmic narration presents the events of the story in such a way so as to prompt the audience to make erroneous inferences about the reality of characters, events, or entire worlds. The real state of affairs is only revealed in the ending. The narrative's dynamic is thus geared towards a final plot twist. The narration usually deceives the spectator by restricting perspective and knowledge to the central character, who turns out to be the victim of an illusion of some kind.<sup>6</sup> The

1 For a detailed analysis of the reader's cognitive activity involved in projecting unreliability, see A. Nünning (1998b: 23–32; 2005: 99–104).

2 The concept of unreliability has sometimes been expanded to include consciously deceptive narrators, even though this implies a major shift in the narrative constellation and, consequently, in the effect on the reader.

3 Whether readers actually adopt a diverging view by projecting unreliability onto the narrator depends to a large degree on their own world-view and predispositions, which may change over time, as Vera Nünning (1998) has shown from a cognitivist stance.

4 Further examples are "The Yellow Wallpaper" (1892) by Charlotte Perkins Gilman, "Oil of Dog" (1911) by Ambrose Bierce, "Haircut" (1925) by Ring Lardner, and *The Remains of the Day* (1989) by Kazuo Ishiguro.

5 E.g. Liptay/Wolf (2005b: 15), Helbig (2005, 2006b), Hartmann (2005), Lahde (2005, 2006), Thoenes (2006), Laass (2006: 257–258), Orth (2006) and Poppe (2009).

6 Typically the narration gives various clues as to the illusory nature of the protagonist's perceptions before the ending but makes sure the hints are subtle enough not to give away the surprise. See Helbig (2005) and Brütisch (2011a: 182–211).

aligning of spectator and character continues until the end, since the final revelation usually enlightens them both. On the other hand, the surprise ending establishes a distance between the spectator and the narration in which crucial information turns out to have been withheld. Examples of this "prototype" are *La Rivière du Hibou* (Robert Enrico, France 1962), in which we learn at the end that the protagonist's adventurous escape from captivity and execution was only a last-minute fantasy before dying,<sup>7</sup> or *The Sixth Sense* (M. Night Shyamalan, USA 1999), in which the main character, a psychologist watching over a boy who sees ghosts, is himself revealed to be a ghost.<sup>8</sup>

## 2. Dissimilarities between the Two Standard Examples

In order to highlight the differences between these two notions of unreliable narration (subsequently referred to as the literary and filmic prototypes), I have compiled a list of important dissimilarities:

- *Deception*: In the literary prototype, the reader is not deceived (or is so only at the very beginning) but, on the contrary, recognizes illusions or misunderstandings on the part of the narrator. In the filmic prototype, the spectator just as the main character is deceived until the surprise ending.
- *Distance between narrational instances*: In the literary prototype, there is a distance between reader and narrator but none between the reader and the narrative text as a whole. In the filmic prototype, there is no distance between spectator and character but rather, implicitly, between the spectator and the narrative text as a whole, which becomes explicit in the final revelation.
- *Discrepancy*: In the literary prototype, there is a discrepancy between the narrator's version of the story and the reader's understanding and reconstruction of that same story. In the filmic prototype, there is a discrepancy between the story version first conveyed by the narration and the one it reveals in the ending.
- *Irony*: The narrative constellation in the literary prototype is ironic since an implicit meaning can be construed which differs from the explicit one. In the filmic prototype, there is no such ironic

7 For a close analysis of the narrative structure in Enrico's short film, see Brütisch (2011a: 204–207; 292–295).

8 Further examples are: *Dans la Nuit* (FR 1929), *The Woman in the Window* (USA 1944), *Angel Heart* (USA 1987), *Abre los ojos* (Spain/FR/IT 1997), *The Matrix* (USA 1999), *A Beautiful Mind* (USA 2001), *The Others* (Spain/FR/USA 2001), *Identity* (USA 2003) and *El Maquinista* (Spain 2004).

duplicity (in any case, not on first viewing) since the reconstruction of the alternative version is explicitly carried out by the filmic narration.

- *Dramaturgy*: In the literary prototype, the discrepancy is established early on and remains until the end. In the filmic prototype, the discrepancy becomes apparent only at the moment when it is finally revealed.
- *Surprise*: In the literary prototype, there is no surprise effect (or only a minor one at the beginning). In the filmic prototype, the entire dramatic structure is oriented towards the final plot twist.
- *Focalization/Subjectivity*: In the literary prototype, even though the point of view is restricted, the reader is able to acquire a broader perspective by projecting unreliability and drawing on his own knowledge. The dynamic thus elicits objectivity from subjectivity. In the filmic prototype, it turns out that the spectator was restricted to the experience of the central character in a much more fundamental way than at first seemed the case. The dynamic thus elicits (revealed) subjectivity from (apparent) objectivity.<sup>9</sup>

In view of this long list of differences, one may raise the question whether there are any similarities at all between the two constellations, especially given that many film scholars have transferred the concept of unreliable narration from one to the other. There are, of course, parallels between the two on a general level. The fact that there is some kind of deception and discrepancy connected to the process of narration and reception, that something must be interpreted differently than the narration suggests, seems to be the common ground that justifies the transfer. Nonetheless, the list I have presented shows that these rather unspecific similarities are outweighed by a number of important differences that become obvious as soon as one examines the exact location of the discrepancies and deceptions.

One may object that my prototypes exaggerate differences and disregard distinctions already made by several authors. The distinctions between *misevaluating* and *misreporting* (Phelan/Martin 1999) or *normative* and *factual unreliability* (A. Nünning 1998b: 12–13), which have gained general acceptance, are not identical, however, with the distinction between my literary and filmic prototypes; for the literary narrator often misreports on the basis of his erroneous judgments (as is the case in “Dead as They Come”), and false evaluations also play a significant role in the filmic prototype, albeit not at the level of narration but of reception. There is a

partial match, though, since the literary prototype has an affinity to the normative and the filmic prototype to the factual type of unreliability. But this link is not exclusive because mis- or underreporting does not necessarily mislead readers/spectators (as would have to be the case in the filmic prototype) but can just as well be detected from the start (as in the literary prototype).

### 3. The Literary Prototype in Film (and Vice-Versa)

How did the term “unreliable narration” come to be used in neighbouring fields for two narrative constellations more different than similar? One of the reasons seems to have been that literary and film scholars alike were eager to stress differences between the two media, especially the fact that in literature narration can be personalized, whereas in film, at least at the highest level, it necessarily remains impersonal and abstract without psychological attributes.<sup>10</sup> This view is based on the assumption that, contrary to verbal narration, to narrate by means of sound and image about past events is not a common form of human expression. Therefore it appears much more natural to presuppose a personal narrator when reading a novel than when watching a film. Moreover, film production is a collaborative enterprise that normally resists the projection of a single entity responsible for the overall design of the work.

However reasonable this view seems, it ignores the exceptional case in which a filmmaker is established as being responsible for the film’s narration not on a secondary level as the author of a film within the film but on a primary level as the individual accountable for all images and sounds. Just as novelists can create narrators who appear to be in charge of the narration, filmmakers may invent directors appearing to be in charge of narration. As a result of this operation we get fake documentaries in which fictional filmmakers report on their lives or the lives of others. Examples of this kind are *David Holzman’s Diary* (Jim McBride, USA 1967) or *Zusje* (*Little Sister*, Robert J. Westdijk, Netherlands 1995). The narrative constellation in these films corresponds to first-person narratives in literature, where the narrator claims to report on real events and persons he has known and observed.

The question is whether filmic narration which can thus become personalized may be as unreliable as the first-person narrator in literature. An example of this kind would confirm the hypothesis that the narrative

9 The only publications, to my knowledge, that address several of these differences systematically are Vogt (2009) and Koch (2011).

10 E.g. Liptay/Wolf (2005b: 13–14), Helbig (2005: 131–134), Lahde (2005: 294), Laass (2006: 254–256), Orth (2006: 286–288) and Poppe (2009: 70).

constellation of the literary prototype, often labelled "genuinely literary" (e.g. Martínez/Scheffel 2002 [1999]: 101), may also be found in film. *C'est arrivé près de chez vous* (*Man Bites Dog*, Rémy Belvaux/André Bonzel/Benoît Poelvoorde, Belgium 1992) is just such an example. It pretends to be a documentary about Ben's daily life as shot by three filmmakers. Ben's occupation, however—murdering and robbing people—is rather uncommon. What is striking about this mockumentary is that the filmmakers, who repeatedly appear onscreen or are heard on the soundtrack, not only let Ben go on with his killings without interfering, but they eventually even participate in them. Moreover, they ask Ben all kinds of questions, but never why he is killing people or how he feels about what he is doing. This omission is foregrounded in a scene in which Ben loses his bracelet while chasing a victim. The film director immediately asks him whether the lost bracelet has any sentimental value to which he gives a prolonged, affirmative answer. The film crew's attitude can thus be qualified as unreliable in the sense of Phelan and Martin's *underregarding*. In addition, analysis of the film's aesthetic qualities provides examples of *misregarding* such as when the filmmakers show Ben's killings in a swift montage-sequence, attempting to present his activities in a stylish manner worthy of their admiration, or when they help Ben dispose of the victim while laughing at his racist and sexist jokes.

The explicit message of the fictional documentary is that Ben's behaviour is funny, admirable, and a good example to be followed. Analytical detachment or critical questions are not necessary. The implicit meaning of *Man Bites Dog*, however, can be understood as the exact opposite: a sharp critique of reality-TV shows and their lack of critical stance towards their protagonists. The fictional filmmakers are not aware of this implicit meaning, even though their roles are played by the real filmmakers themselves. The controversial reactions provoked by the mockumentary reveal that not all spectators were willing to make this distinction. An ironic reading, however, is possible and demonstrates that filmic narration is capable of unreliability corresponding to the literary prototype.

Conversely, that the narrative constellation typical for the filmic prototype—false leads ending in a major plot twist—can be found in literary fiction is even more easily demonstrated since short stories and novels such as Ambrose Bierce's "An Occurrence at Owl Creek Bridge" (1890)<sup>11</sup> or Leo Perutz' *Zwischen neun und neun* (1918)<sup>12</sup> are more common than the exceptional case of *Man Bites Dog*. These examples are not usually con-

11 The short film *La Rivière du Hibou*, mentioned above, is based on Bierce's short story.

12 Just as in "An Occurrence at Owl Creek Bridge," most of the events narrated in Perutz' novel turn out to be a mere fantasy of the dying protagonist who jumped from the roof of a building to escape from two policemen.

sidered unreliable narratives despite corresponding exactly to works so labelled in the other media.<sup>13</sup>

#### 4. Ambiguity and Its Relation to Unreliable Narration

A prominent work of fiction belonging neither to the literary nor to the filmic prototype but sometimes discussed as an example of unreliable narration is *The Turn of the Screw* (1898) by Henry James. Booth himself called the governess (author of the intradiegetic manuscript, which constitutes the major part of James' novella) "only one of a great number of indeterminately unreliable narrators who have led readers into public controversy" (1983 [1961]: 315). In her account as it is conveyed to us by an unnamed narrator who has heard the manuscript read, the governess tells about her stay at the country estate Bly where she had been employed to look after Miles and Flora, the nephew and niece of a wealthy young bachelor. Given full charge of the children, the young and inexperienced woman at first feels insecure about the big assignment but is quickly reassured and even delighted by the charm of the two children. The only matter disturbing the harmonious atmosphere at this point is a letter from the headmaster stating that young Miles has been expelled from school. There are no reasons given and the governess, hesitating to directly confront the boy, explains the matter away by telling herself that there might be a mistake or that the headmaster overreacted. Soon thereafter, the governess starts noticing a man and a woman on the premises who are not residents of the estate. When she describes them to the housekeeper, she discovers that their appearance corresponds exactly to that of Peter Quint, a former Valet at Bly, and Miss Jessel, the governess' predecessor, who both died under mysterious circumstances. Although no one else acknowledges their presence, the Governess is soon convinced not only that the apparitions are ghosts of the former employees but also that the children are aware of them and under their bad influence. The governess urges Flora to confess that she has been secretly communicating with Miss Jessel, but the girl strongly denies this and demands to be taken away from the governess, a wish she is granted due to her feverish condition. Left

13 Martínez and Scheffel are among the few who classify novels such as Perutz' *Zwischen neun und neun* as a form of factual unreliability ("mimetisch teilweise unzuverlässiges Erzählen", 2002 [1999]: 102–103), but by doing so they contradict their own definition of unreliable narration as a form of ironic communication (ibid.: 100–101). In recent contributions—probably due to the influence of film scholars' publications—it has become more common to mention retroactive constellations in discussions of literary unreliability (cf. articles in this volume by, for example, Vogt, Pettersson, Nünning/Schwanecke, Nünning).

alone with the boy, the governess is about to confront Miles about his expulsion from school when the figure of Peter Quint appears again. The governess tries to shield the boy from the evil apparition and to squeeze a confession out of him only to realise after the figure has vanished that he has died in her arms.

*The Turn of the Screw* has been discussed in relation not only to the concept of unreliable narration but also to the concept of the fantastic. For Todorov (1975 [1970]), the fantastic arises when, in a fictional world that seems to obey the laws of our world, strange happenings occur that defy these laws and can be accounted for by two mutually exclusive explanations, one natural and the other supernatural. The hesitation on the reader's part between the two is what constitutes for Todorov the genre of the fantastic. Besides *La Vénus de l'Île* (Prosper Mérimée, 1837), *The Turn of the Screw* is the only example Todorov gives of the "pure fantastic", i.e. of narratives which sustain the reader's uncertainty until and beyond the end. James' novella, Todorov writes, "does not permit us to determine finally whether ghosts haunt the old estate, or whether we are confronted by the hallucinations of a hysterical governess victimized by the disturbing atmosphere which surrounds her" (1975 [1970]: 43).

Todorov does not explicitly invoke the concept of the unreliable narrator introduced by Booth less than a decade earlier. And among the scholars taking up Todorov's theory and developing it further, only some have seen a connection (e.g. Simonis 2005; Horstkotte 2007) while others have explicitly cautioned against confusing the two concepts (e.g. Wörtche 1987; Durst 2007).

##### 5. Unreliability vs. Destabilization

I would like to now turn our focus to the question of whether narrators of fantastic tales can be called unreliable in the sense of the literary prototype. Wörtche and Durst both argue that a special kind of narrator is called for in order to achieve the effect of the fantastic, but they call him or her "destabilized", "shattered" ("zerrüttet") or "disintegrated" ("démontiert") rather than unreliable (Wörtche 1987: 159). Discussing a particular strategy by which his or her authority may be undermined (modalisations such as the use of "as if"-clauses), they make the distinction between the two explicit:

Wörtche is right to note that the disintegration of the narrator is not to be confused with the concept of the unreliable narrator [Wörtche 1987: 102]. Booth calls a narrator unreliable when he does not "speak for or act in accordance with the norms of the work (which is to say, the implied author's norms)" as for in-

stance "in Huckleberry Finn [wherein] the narrator claims to be naturally wicked while the author silently praises his virtues behind his back" (Durst 2007: 190, my translation).

While I see good reasons for distinguishing between the instability or disintegration and the unreliability of the narrator, I argue that there is nevertheless a match between the two, albeit only a partial one: unreliable narrators are often destabilized, but destabilized narrators need not be unreliable.

What is meant by the "instability" or "destabilization" of the narrator and his or her account? Authors using these terms alongside or instead of "unreliability"<sup>14</sup> usually refer to the following aspects:

- the character traits, behaviour, psychological disposition and mental health of the narrator;
- his or her situation;
- the narrative perspective adopted;
- the way he or she relates what happened.

The more dubious the character, odd the behaviour, fragile the disposition, and stressful the situation, the more probable that the narrator may appear destabilized to the reader. As for the narrative perspective, most authors agree that a more or less strong restriction to the narrator's subjective experience is an important prerequisite for his or her destabilization.<sup>15</sup> And concerning the manner in which the narrator tells his or her story, the following features are said to destabilize his or her account:

- the use of modalizing formulas such as "it was as if", "it seemed", "you could almost say that", etc., which immediately cast doubt on what is asserted.
- explicitly expressed doubts by the narrator about his own ability to accurately remember or relate what happened.
- the "grammatical disintegration" ("grammatische Zerrüttung"; Durst 2007: 191) of the language used.

<sup>14</sup> Spiegel uses "destabilized" and "unreliable" synonymously (2010: 60). Simonis makes some distinctions but also sees close relations (2005: 199–229) while Wörtche and Durst draw a line between the two (see above).

<sup>15</sup> For Todorov, only first person narrators can fully guarantee the fantastic effect, since assertions by third-person narrators are too authoritative to allow for the necessary doubt on the reader's part (1975 [1970]: 83). This (pre-genetien) position overlooks the fact that restriction to the subjective experience of a single character is the pertinent factor here, and that this kind of perspective, while not necessarily implied by homodiegetic narration, can just as well be established by heterodiegetic narration (cf. Durst 2007: 188).

6. *The Turn of the Screw* vs. *The Green Man*

*The Green Man* by Kingsley Amis (1969), reputed as an instance of a fantastic tale with an unreliable narrator by Horstkotte (2007), may exemplify the above mentioned strategies of destabilization and at the same time establish a difference to *The Turn of the Screw* despite similarities in the alleged supernatural occurrences (i.e. the appearance of ghosts). The novel's homodiegetic narrator, Maurice Allington, freely admits he is "on a bottle of Scotch a day" habit which "had been [his] standard for twenty years" (Amis 1969: 12). In his mid fifties, he begins to suffer from various symptoms of old age and is repeatedly troubled by a combination of hypnagogic jactitation and hallucinations, which, as he explains in detail, are involuntary spasms of the muscles before falling asleep accompanied by visual illusions. He is in charge of a large inn and must cope with undependable employees, his daughter and second wife, who both feel neglected, and the death of his father, who suffers a lethal stroke early in the story. Alongside these troubles, he engages in a secret sexual adventure with the wife of his doctor; all of this amounts to a lot of stress (subdued with alcohol and pills) and little sleep.

When a character in such circumstances starts seeing ghosts, it is only natural for us readers to be somewhat sceptical about their real existence. This attitude is reinforced when the narrator uses phrases like "I vaguely saw [...]" (ibid.: 13), "I heard, or thought I heard [...]" (ibid.: 87, 118) or when he makes assertions only to disqualify them right away as in the following passage: "However, I felt certain that this was the first time tonight I had seen what I now saw. Feeling certain of that kind of thing is very far, in cases like mine, from being certain" (ibid.: 121). The unbelieving reactions of the characters around him, of which the following statement by his doctor is a typical instance, are another factor weighing on our judgement:

Right. Now, whatever you see in this way can't harm you. I can understand your being frightened by these things, but try to remember that that's as much as they can do. Delirium tremens is a warning, not a disaster in itself, and we can deal with it. It's usually brought on by emotional strain, plus drink, of course, and I'd put all this down to your father's death. I think these ghosts of yours were a sort of prelude to the business in the bathroom, and your general idea that there are sinister and hostile characters around is very common in these cases. Are you with me? (ibid.: 159)

Unlike in many horror stories where reassurances like this one are only meant to highlight the isolation of the hero whom nobody believes except us as readers, here it is an objection to be taken seriously, especially since the narrator himself, at least till the last part of his narrative, regularly

takes up arguments against the real existence of his ghosts as the following passage shows:

I could not tell Lucy or anyone else, including myself, that I had not read the affidavit before. It was possible—I disbelievably supposed it to be just possible—that my earlier couple of readings had impressed the facts on some buried part of my mind, from which something had dredged them up to create an illusion. (ibid.: 106)

The effect of the fantastic, as described by Todorov, would not be established, of course, if there were not also factors in support of the ghost theory. First of all, the fact that a character is in poor shape and that his account appears "destabilized" does not mean that he could not be right about his supernatural perceptions. Second, as the apparitions grow in number and concreteness, they seem to affect the real world in a way that is not so easily explained away, as when objects (apparently) put into play by the alleged ghosts are found by Allington outside of his par-normal encounters and are tangible for other characters as well or when his daughter is attacked by one of the creatures (or did she only dream it and get hurt while sleepwalking?).

Is the narrator of *The Green Man* not only destabilized but also unreliable as Horstkotte claims in his analysis? Reconsidering the central feature of our definition of literary unreliability—ironic distance between reader and narrator resulting from a discrepancy in knowledge and understanding—we have to acknowledge that, rather than being distanced and feeling better informed, we are led to share Allington's insecurity throughout a large part of the narrative. And when in the last part of the story evidence of the ghosts' real existence grows stronger and he starts to be convinced that they are not just hallucinations, so are we. Since Amis' novel does not establish the kind of evaluative or cognitive discrepancy typical of unreliable narration, I claim that its narrator cannot be called unreliable in the sense of the literary prototype.

Is that to say that narrators of fantastic tales are always reliable even if they are severely destabilized? Let us refer back to *The Turn of the Screw* to answer this question. The governess in James' novella is healthy and does not drink alcohol or swallow pills, but she is young and inexperienced, emotionally instable, easily excitable, rather fanciful, and under heavy pressure to live up to her responsibilities in an unfamiliar environment. Preoccupied first by her big assignment, then by Miles' expulsion from school and finally by the sinister apparitions, and unable to turn to her employer for help—he made it clear not to be bothered under any circumstances—she stays awake for nights on end and shows more and more signs of agitation and isolation. Thus, in her own way, she appears just as destabilized as Allington.



What about her account? In this respect, *The Turn of the Screw* differs radically from *The Green Man*. While Allington continually cautions the reader against the trustworthiness of his own perceptions and recollections, the governess is firmly convinced not only that what she sees is really there but also that the ghosts secretly communicate with the children and try to harm them. Instead of explicitly addressing the problems of her own disposition and cognitive abilities, she emphatically affirms her perceptions and inferences. The following are a few examples of this mindset.

Of her first encounter with Quint she writes:

The gold was still in the sky, the clearness in the air, and the man who looked at me over the battlements was as definite as a picture in a frame. [...] So I saw him as I see the letters I form on this page [...]. (James 2008 [1898]: 26–27)

The account of her first sight of Miss Jessel reads:

I began to take in with certitude and yet without direct vision the presence, a good way off, of a third person. [...] There was no ambiguity in anything; none whatever at least in the conviction I from one moment to another found myself forming as to what I should see straight before me [...]. (ibid.: 45)

On the question of Quint's intentions, she conveys her thoughts and dialogue with Mrs. Grose:

On the spot there came to me the added shock of a certitude that it was not for me he had come. He had come for someone else. [...] "He was looking for little Miles." A portentous clearness now possessed me. "That's whom he was looking for." —[Mrs. Grose:] "But How do you know?" —"I know, I know, I know!" My exaltation grew. "And *you* know, my dear!" She did not deny this, but I required, I felt, not even so much telling as that. [...] I had an absolute certainty that I should see again what I had already seen [...]. (ibid.: 32, 39–40)

And concerning the ghost's menace to the children, she writes:

I was a screen—I was to stand before them. The more I saw the less they would. I began to watch them in a stifled suspense, a disguised tension, that might well, had it continued too long, have turned to something like madness. What saved me, as I now see, was that it turned to another matter altogether. It didn't last as suspense—it was superseded by horrible proofs. Proofs, I say, yes—from the moment I really took hold. (ibid.: 43–44)

"Definite", "certitude", "no ambiguity", "conviction", "clearness", "certainty", "proofs", etc.: expressions like these leave no doubt as to the governess' firm belief in the ghosts' actual presence and threat—an attitude in sharp contrast to Allington's hesitation in deciding whether the ghosts he sees are real or not. So the narrator's stance is clear,<sup>16</sup> but what about the reader's? The question of the ghosts' reality in *The Turn of the*

<sup>16</sup> The Governess has her moments of doubt, although not concerning the existence of the ghosts, but the children's complicity.

*Screw* has triggered a heated debate with critics arguing for and against it or maintaining that undecidability is the central effect. James' novella is a telling instance of the historical variability of readers' responses to works of fiction since, according to Peter G. Beidler's survey, "virtually all of James' contemporaries read it as a spine-chilling ghost story" (2004: 192) whereas positions making a case for the governess' insanity gained prominence from the 1930s to the 1960s. Later, a dualistic view focusing on the text's ambiguity started to dominate critical discourse, with Todorov's *The Fantastic*, mentioned above, paving the way for this position.<sup>17</sup>

For our purpose, which is more theoretical than historical, suffice it to say that soon after *The Turn of the Screw* was published the first reviews appeared arguing against the governess' version of the story and that the dominant critical stance from the 1970s has been a bipolar reading highlighting the effects of hesitation and insecurity. If the governess' version is not taken at face value, either because it is rejected outright or because the possibility of an alternate version is taken into account, then the reader distances himself from the narrator. And since the only version explicitly conveyed is the one given (or, rather, emphatically asserted) by the governess, an alternative reading has to be grounded on implicit clues. In *The Turn of the Screw*—contrary to *The Green Man*—the conditions for unreliability in the sense of the literary prototype are thus met. On the relation between the concepts of the fantastic and unreliability, we can conclude that in cases where the narrator does not hesitate between a natural and a supernatural explanation but firmly believes in the latter while implicit clues invite the reader to waver between the two, unreliability plays a crucial role inasmuch as the reader's hesitation is not just between two kinds of fictional worlds but also between two kinds of narrators, one reliable and one unreliable. In cases where the narrator hesitates in accord with the reader, on the other hand, I would argue that unreliability in the above sense is not a central feature.<sup>18</sup>

<sup>17</sup> This is of course a simplified account of Beidler's critical history, which is only meant to show the range and changeability of points of view.

<sup>18</sup> Todorov already pointed to the fact that the character-narrator's uncertainty is only an optional ingredient to the fantastic effect, for which the readers' hesitation is essential (1975 [1970]: 31–33). On this point, Simonis is inaccurate when she writes that "Todorov however still locates the attitude of hesitation primarily (even if not exclusively) on the level of the characters in action who are surprised by strange occurrences [...]" (2005: 208, my translation).



### 7. Signs of Unreliability Reconsidered

What then are Horstkotte's arguments for calling the narrator of *The Green Man* unreliable? He refers to textual clues established as signs of unreliability by some of the most prominent scholars in the field:

- (1) strong personalization of the narrative situation (Zerweck);
- (2) the narrator's untrustworthy personality and character (Allrath);
- (3) his or her unintentional self-incrimination (Zerweck);
- (4) contrasts between descriptions of events and their explanations and interpretations (Booth; A. Nünning);
- (5) the narrator's self-conscious raising of issues of (un)reliability (A. Nünning).

Horstkotte sees strong evidence for all of these signs in *The Green Man*: (1) Allington is a strongly personalized first-person narrator; (2) his behaviour towards most of the other characters is questionable; (3) he obviously has a drinking problem which might directly be connected to his visions but is casual about it; (4) when confronted with justified accusations by his wife or son, his thoughts are somewhere else; and (5) he repeatedly and self-consciously muses about his memory lapses.

Against these points, I submit the following rebuttal:

- (1) The personalization of the narrative situation is, as Zerweck and Horstkotte themselves admit, only a prerequisite for unreliability, not a sign of it.
- (2) To directly infer anything from the character and personality the narrator was at the time the events in the story took place (i.e. from his or her behaviour towards other characters) about his or her reliability as a narrator (i.e. to his or her present relation to the narratee) is highly problematic. For readers of *Huckleberry Finn* who condemn slavery, its narrator is at the same time behaving exemplary and narrating unreliably (in the normative sense). And the narrator of "Dead as They Come" does not appear unreliable because of "abusing" a dummy, but because he talks about it as if it had been a living human being.<sup>19</sup>

19 This is why I believe that, even if "a male chauvinist fetishist who gets his kicks out of making love to dummies is unlikely to detect any distance between his norms and those of the mad monologist," as A. Nünning (1997: 101) puts it, this kind of reader would probably still be struck by the inadequateness of taking a dead object for a living being and thus detect a discrepancy in cognitive abilities sufficient to project unreliability. The distance between narrator and reader depends on the similarity of their assessment and evaluation of what happened in the story, which is only partly determined by factors such as their sexual orientation and behaviour. A pederast, to take A. Nünning's second example (*ibid.*), if more conscious of the wrongness of seducing children than Humbert/Humbert, could very well notice inconsistencies in the account of his relation to Lolita even if he shares the same perverse sexual orientation.

- (3) & (4) I do not see much of either in *The Green Man* and do not think Horstkotte's examples are valid instances of these clues. There are many passages of self-incrimination, to be sure, but, as mentioned above, most of them are *intentional and self-conscious* rather than unintentional. Which brings me to (5), a point worthy of a more detailed discussion.

There is no doubt that Allington raises the issue of the potential unreliability of his perceptions and memories again and again, thus openly destabilizing his own account in the sense discussed above. But is that a sign of narrative unreliability? Examining A. Nünning's catalogue of 13 textual clues for unreliability (1998b: 27–28) to which Horstkotte refers<sup>20</sup> (and which is one of the most advanced of its kind), we observe that all but two of the entries are either forms of contradictions, discrepancies or contrasts directly inviting readers to take their distances towards the narrator (clues 1–7) or signs of his or her strong subjectivity, emotional involvement and efforts to gain the understanding of the narratee (8–11), which are not, strictly speaking, direct clues to unreliability but nevertheless may caution readers to be on their guard and thus prepare the ground for their detachment. The last two signs (*acknowledged* untrustworthiness and *acknowledged* partiality), on the other hand, tend to *approximate* rather than to distance the reader's and the narrator's views—provided, of course, the readers agree with this judgement (which is, I would say, the case in *The Green Man*). They are no doubt indications that what the narrator reports may be inaccurate and how he comments may be biased, but unreliability as conceived above is not primarily a matter of knowing what really happened and how best to evaluate it but of what stance the reader takes vis-à-vis the narrator and his account. If reader and narrator *both* suspect that things might have happened differently than how the latter remembers and describes them, then they are united in their doubt rather than separated by differing standpoints. In this constellation, acknowledged untrustworthiness and acknowledged partiality are signs of narrative *reliability* rather than of narrative unreliability!

Unreliability is a relational phenomenon. That a narrator's account cannot be trusted is not enough to make him unreliable. What are needed additionally are signs of his belief in his version of the story without which there is no (ironic) distance and thus no unreliability (in the sense of the literary prototype). Because of the relationality of the concept, a narrator's "emphatic assertion" and his "acknowledged untrustworthiness" may *both* serve to form an unreliable narrative constellation, although they are diametrically opposed attitudes—on condition that readers are led to take a contrary stance, entertaining doubts in the former case (as in *The Turn of*

20 Horstkotte refers to Nünning (1997) which by and large discusses the same textual clues.

the *Screw*) and trusting in the narrator's good faith despite his open self incrimination in the latter case (as in *Huckleberry Finn*).<sup>21</sup>

Narratives with fantastic ambiguity as their central feature are interesting test cases in yet another respect. Among the signs of unreliability to be found in the violation of narrative conventions, Gaby Allrath calls attention to focalizations of other character's consciousness not accounted for in any way (1998: 68–69). The governess' report clearly contains transgressions of this kind since she repeatedly tells us about thoughts and emotions of the children to which as a restricted homodiegetic narrator she cannot have direct access and which can hardly be gained by mere outside observation. How can the ambiguous structure which pivotally relies on the hesitation between projecting and not projecting unreliability be maintained despite these apparent signs of unreliability? The solution lies in the subordination of norms of focalization to the conventions of genre. In a *realist setting*, it is implausible for a character to intuitively sense without much external evidence what other characters feel and think. In a *marvellous world* (as defined by Todorov) with supernatural laws, on the other hand, the powers of insight may well be stronger and render the governess' code of focalization much less transgressive and therefore also less unreliable. And because most readers of James' novella hesitate between assuming exactly these two kinds of fictional worlds, its dualistic design is not only undisturbed but even perfectly enhanced by the clue to unreliability mentioned by Allrath, which in this context is only potential.

We are now in a position to better differentiate between narrative destabilization and unreliability. The former method aims at (depending on its force) casting doubts on or clearly discrediting what is asserted, the latter at establishing a discrepancy between the narrator's and the reader's assessment and evaluation. The two only coincide if destabilization goes as far as completely discrediting or, in the case of only casting doubt, if the narrator is not himself conscious of the epistemic precariousness of his account.

Concerning the concept of the fantastic, we can observe that a frequent strategy to achieve ambiguity is to confront a narrator (as experiencing character) who already appears destabilized by his disposition and situation with frightening and apparently supernatural occurrences throwing him completely off track but leave it to the reader to decide whether his behaviour is justified—after all, it is quite natural to be highly troubled

21 Complemented accordingly, A. Nünning's twelfth and thirteenth entries may well remain in the catalogue.

when encountering evil-minded ghosts—or a sign of mental illness (which would account for the hallucination of paranormal activities).<sup>22</sup>

## 8. Ambiguity, Destabilization, and Unreliability in *The Blair Witch Project*

So far I have only mentioned literary examples. What about ambiguity and its relation to destabilization and unreliability in film? In her book-length study of the fantastic genre in literature, Simonis briefly turns to film but only to deplore the gapless hyper reality of Hollywood's fantasy-blockbusters,

obviously going directly against the fundamental principles of the narrative tradition [...] and the specific appeal of the genre of the fantastic [...] which are substantially based on techniques of suggestion and allusion actively involving the reader and his power of imagination in the process of constructing the story (2005: 60–61, my translation).

If we were to adhere to Simonis' view, we could close the subject without further consideration. But she not only unquestioningly takes fantasy films to correspond to the genre of the fantastic (while in Todorov's system most films so labelled would rather belong to the marvellous), she also obviously did not look beyond Hollywood mainstream to find any more convincing examples.

Discussing the literary prototype of unreliability in film, it appeared above that the filmic equivalent to personalised homodiegetic narration are fake documentaries in which filmmakers report audiovisually on what they experience. A fantastic film involving unreliability in the literary sense would thus have to be looked for in this genre which is the domain of independent low budget productions rather than Hollywood. *The Blair Witch Project* (Daniel Myrick/Eduardo Sanchez, USA 1999), one of the first movies that comes to mind because of its huge success at the turn of the millennium, seems to be a promising candidate.<sup>23</sup>

The film opens with the following caption: "In October of 1994, three student filmmakers disappeared in the woods near Burkittsville, Maryland while shooting a documentary. A year later their footage was found." Next, blurry images taken from a Hi-8 camcorder appear and a voice can be heard saying: "It's already recording!" Then a girl, Heather, comes into

22 *La Vénus de l'Île* is a special case insofar as a fantastic effect is achieved despite the fact that its (homodiegetic) narrator—who is observing from a distance—does not appear destabilized and also does not believe in the supernatural explanation given by the characters directly involved with the ominous statue.

23 For a general discussion of the applicability of Todorov's (literary) concept to film, see Carroll (1990: 144–157).

focus showing her home and explaining that these are the comforts she will be leaving for the weekend to explore the Blair Witch. In the next scene, still conveyed to us through the handheld camcorder, a guy, Josh, with a 16mm camera and other shooting equipment joins the girl and sets his own camera into motion in response to her recording. Through parallel editing, this response results in a switching back and forth between footage from the two cameras, each showing the other person and camera in action. The next bit of footage shows them picking up a third member of the crew, Mike, and setting out to shoot their documentary.

In more than one respect, this beginning recalls the frame set up in *The Turn of the Screw*. Both narrations establish early on that the bulk of what will be conveyed to us is a record left behind by someone (or a group of people) who has (have) died or disappeared, that no other points of view will be offered than the one given in this chronicle, and that we are to expect a sinister turn of events. In addition, *The Blair Witch Project* establishes a series of parameters important for the (relative) plausibility of what follows. The crew members are introduced as persons who are obsessively filming every step of their investigation and who let the camera roll even during their own personal interactions. The dialogue is supposed to make us believe that there is enough battery power to shoot for a long time without recharging and we grow accustomed to the (unexplained) fact of seeing the footage (from both cameras) in edited form.

To briefly sum up the itinerary of the crew: First, they travel to Burkittsville to ask local people about the Blair Witch. Then they start to explore the woods nearby to look for signs of her and to visit sites where, as legend has it, people disappeared or were found dead. As they move deeper into the woods, they lose track of their location on the map and are finally unable to find where they parked the car. Forced to camp in the woods much longer than planned and unable to find a way out of it, they start to tire out and at the same time to notice more and more strange objects and eerie sounds that point to the real existence and close proximity of the witch. During the fifth night, Josh disappears, and the following night screams of horror are heard, but Heather and Mike are not sure they are Josh's. Finally, the two arrive at an abandoned house, from the inside of which the same kinds of screams resonate. Convinced they have found Josh, they search the house, but, as Mike reaches the basement, his camera drops to the floor. As Heather hurries to catch up with him, her camera briefly shows Mike standing motionless in the corner, facing the wall, before it is forced to the ground and stops rolling.

Like *The Turn of the Screw*, *The Blair Witch Project* introduces a number of uncanny elements but never actually establishes the existence of the super-

natural as an irrefutable fact. In many respects, it creates a fantastic effect as defined by Todorov. How is this possible, given the photographic nature of the medium and the fact that what we are seeing is presented (within the fictional framework set up in the beginning) as audiovisual recordings? The most important strategy the film adopts to enable fantastic hesitation despite technological factuality is to never show the putative witch onscreen and to only present possible signs of her evil doings. In addition, the signs are such that they can not only be explained supernaturally but also naturally. To be more concrete: Since the beginning of their investigation, the crew (and we as spectators) have been suspicious that some of the local people (who know they are in the woods looking for the legendary witch) could play a nasty trick on them. All of the sounds they hear and traces they find (e.g. piles of stones, wooden figures, slime, a blood-soaked tooth and tongue) could just as easily be explained by animal or man-made causes.

The limited scope of the cameras, especially at night in the dense wood, is another factor enhancing the fantastic effect. The fact that the crew members, who started out enthusiastic, are more and more frightened and hide with their cameras in the tent or run away from apparent signs of the witch explains why the footage left to us is not only fragmentary but often also jittery or blurry and never really catches a clear view of anything that could prove the existence of the witch beyond reasonable doubt.

Are the crew members, the sole "producers" of the record left to us<sup>24</sup> (and in this respect resemble homodiegetic verbal narrators), destabilized and/or unreliable in the above defined (literary) sense? Concerning destabilization, we can affirm that the circumstances of their detailed investigation together with the effects of hunger, exhaustion, coldness and fear clearly meet the conditions "stressful situation" and "fragile (physical/psychological) disposition" mentioned above. More interesting, however, is the question whether the second and third criteria ("restriction to the narrator's subjective experience" and "destabilization of his or her account"), which are more media-specific than the former two, can also be fulfilled if the "language" used is audiovisual rather than verbal.

Despite the fact that there is a mechanical basis to audiovisual recordings and that cameras and microphones can be used to register images and sounds independently of human presence and interference,<sup>25</sup> the equipment of the crew and the circumstances of shooting in *The Blair*

24 As mentioned above, editing is the only element not accounted for in this context.

25 As is partly the case in *Paranormal Activity* (Oren Peli, USA 2009). Cf. Spiegel (2010: 133–139) who analyses some of the differences between this film and *The Blair Witch Project*.

*Witch Project*<sup>26</sup> are such that there is a strong relation between the crew members and how and what they film. The cameras are always hand-held, only built-in microphones are employed, and the camera lights are used as torches at night, thus establishing an obvious parallel between human perception and mechanical recording. The "live" recording also automatically eliminates any distance between experiencing and "narrating".<sup>27</sup> Furthermore, through dialogue, self-talk and exclamations, the crew members convey much information about what they think and how they feel. The quality and "style" of the footage, wherein whole stretches are out of focus, jittery or off the mark, also allow the viewer to draw inferences about the physical and psychological disposition of the persons holding the cameras, especially in a context where the declared aim was to shoot a documentary shedding light on a mystery rather than to create a piece of experimental cinema. In a way, these moments are the filmic equivalent to Dursi's "grammatical disintegration", with the final dropping of the cameras as the ultimate loss of control over one's means of expression.

To sum up, destabilization, both of a general and a media specific kind, plays an important part in establishing the fantastic effect of *The Blair Witch Project*. But what about unreliability? In this regard, I see a closer resemblance to *The Green Man* than to *The Turn of the Screw*. Although in the course of the film there may be some differences between characters and spectators in evaluating the probability of supernatural occurrences, I would claim that the overall movement for both is one from more to less doubt and that the potential discrepancy (and, thus, possibility to project unreliability), though present, is weaker than in *The Turn of the Screw*. However, here, as in all the other examples discussed, spectators (and readers) may not agree and therefore may project unreliability to a variable extent.

### 9. Homo- vs. Heterodiegetic Narration

To conclude, I would like to look at a last question concerning all three narrative constellations invoked in this paper: Can ironic distance and ambiguity only be established with homodiegetic character narrators and retroactivity only in heterodiegetic narrative situations or is the inverse nexus possible as well? My answer is: yes, it is possible in all three cases,

26 I am referring to the crew and circumstances of (documentary) shooting as *fictionally established*, of course, and not to the real circumstances of shooting the fake documentary.

27 The literary genre closest to this kind of shortcut between experience and report is diary fiction.

even if there is a clear affinity between ironic distance and the former<sup>28</sup> and a certain affinity between retroactivity and the latter (while ambiguity seems to work equally well with both). Examples in support of my point are "The Disappearance" (a short story by Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni, 1995)<sup>29</sup> and *Einspruch III* (a short film by Rolando Colla, Switzerland, 2002)<sup>30</sup> for ironic distance with heterodiegetic/impersonal narration, *Fight Club* (novel and film, USA 1996/1999) for retroactivity with homodiegetic character narrator and *Rosemary's Baby* (novel and film, USA 1967/1968)<sup>31</sup> or *El Labirinto del Fauno* (Mexico/Spain/USA 2006)<sup>32</sup> for ambiguity with heterodiegetic/impersonal narration. However, two of these constellations do not involve unreliable narration (neither in the sense of the literary nor of the filmic prototype): namely, ambiguity without ironic distance and ironic distance without homodiegetic narrator.

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- 28 This is why ironic distance is less common in film than in literary narration which is much more easily personalized.
- 29 Cf. Fludernik (2005: 53–56).
- 30 Cf. Brütsch (2011b: 7).
- 31 Cf. Brütsch (2011a: 335–343).
- 32 Cf. Spiegel (2010: 161–171).

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44

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